

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick  
Storefront Project  
3/27/93

## Queer Space Ideas

### 1. Queer Habits: Pushing the Envelope

It's been occurring to me that one useful way into the issue of Queer Space might be through the notion of "habit." I like "habit" because it mediates back and forth between active and passive; between the most intimate and the most public space; and also among the realms of static objects and spaces, movements, and behavior.

HABIT = "characteristic bodily or physical condition"  
(Random House Dictionary), bodily habitus: individual carriage, musculature, movement  
(Including some of the most distinctive ways that queer folks interact with ourselves and our environments. The machine-toned gym body, male and female, for one example: the cyborg system formed by an individual body and its machine, in the public/narcissistic space of the gym.... Or the various kinds of habitus involved in the complex semiotics of effeminacy. "Teddy bears" and "fats and fems." Androgyny (or rather androgynies). Etc. etc. etc.)

Pushing outward on the envelope of bodily habitus, we get:

HABIT = clothing: "garb of a particular rank, profession, religious order, etc."  
(Of course this is systemically related to bodily habitus. But ALL these levels are systemically related.) It seems as if a lot of distinctive queer knowledge about space has to do with the relation between these first two levels of "habit": the relation of bodies and clothes. For instance, that bodies and clothes can have many different kinds of relation to each other; that clothes inflect bodies as much as bodies inflect clothes; that clothes always REFER--to other clothes, to other bodies, to other kinds of texts, to other historical moments, to the circumstances of their production and acquisition. Think of the complicated meanings of the white undershirt that crystallizes a certain butch identity for women. Leather. Drag(s). Couture and window dressing. All the queer ways of pushing at this envelope. And the knowledge of how clothing and the clothed body, in turn, carve up social space and make IT signify: t-shirts, drag, leather, women of size, all this as inflected by color....

Pushing at that envelope in turn:

HABIT = "customary practice or use....compulsive need, inclination, or use";  
the repeated gestures or acts by which we and our environment inhabit each other and are impressed on each other--through such routes as substance ingestion and refusal, movement through space (strolling, dancing), "work habits," rituals of interaction and avoidance, consumer habits, etc. (Note that "behavior" comes from the same root as "habit"!)

Whence:

HABIT = "a dominant or regular disposition or tendency; prevailing character or quality."  
The way we are. Our orientation. No matter whether you think of it as inborn or constructed; it's steeped in a near-infinity of histories and interactions, along the same continuum from habitus to habitat.

Then:

HABIT = habitation: "a place of residence; dwelling; abode." Our home (when we have one); what we make of it; what it makes of us. (Which also means: the history of our homes. Differentials between our homes of origin and our present homes. And how such a differential is one of the things that can constitute US.)

And finally:

HABIT = habitat: "the kind of place that is natural for the life and growth of an animal or plant."  
Our environment as a whole; our natural habitat (what we make of it, what it makes of us); where we're an habitue. Its ambivalent relation to our "life and growth"!

I don't have solid ideas yet about how to make this continuum graphic or palpable. But I like the thought of "habit" as a kind of electric, highly conductive, yet volatile aether that transmits imprints of meaning back and forth among the levels of body, clothing, behavior, character, buildings, environs. And it seems as though this might be an apt image-language in which to make vivid some of the really distinctive junctures that have emerged from (or as) gay/lesbian and queer cultures: how habitat, habitation, character, usage, clothing, and bodies have been and can be brought into DIFFERENT, transformative, and revelatory relation to one another.

2. I'm not sure whether this should be thought of as part of the same or a different idea. But something like: QUEER KINESTHETICS. (I'm borrowing the idea of "kinesthetics" from Cindy Patton's work on voguing.) Some kind of installation or

practice that would find ways to explore several forms of movement (and kinesthetic proprioception) as a function of queer identities, queer cultures. What does it mean, how does it occupy time and space, to "feel" or "act" butch? or queeny? or cruisy? clone-y? To vogue, get arrested, snap!, have attitude, play pool, march in a parade (St. Patrick's? Pride?), stand with the spectators? Different kinds of dancing. What does it mean to a well body, going into a hospital? To a sick body? The body experienced as endangered: from inside, from outside. Kinesthetics of memory; loss; rage. Dignity and indignity in the self-experienced body. Being and doing. Media-space and violence; the space of the state and violence. What is it to be in my body, or your body, in social space, on the morning after the Republican National Convention; after the election; after Clinton suggests the segregation of lesbian/gay troops? (To experience these things, as well, from a position of illness or health?)

3. Something to dramatize the ways that space (maybe especially public space) gets continually restructured by THE SPATIAL/THEATRICAL RELATIONS OF THE SOLITARY, THE COUPLE, THE GROUP, THE DEMONSTRATION. (This would have to deal with how differentially all this works according to (for instance) whether the couple is a same-sex or cross-sex couple; also intensively mapped by race.) Experiencing oneself as visible or invisible; as "I" or "we" or "s/he" or "they"; as permitted to look; forced to look; forbidden to look; permitted/forbidden to remark, to intervene, on what's seen. Straight-marked couples and groups in queer space, and vice versa; how danger gets spatially structured.

(Maybe something, too, on the straight public's phantasms of queer space: I'm thinking for instance of Kendall Thomas's paper "Shower/Closet" on the way the fantasy of THE SHOWER is functioning in the debate on gays in the military.)

And then there's THE NATION, the "imagined community." How is gay/lesbian/queer space created AS NATIONAL SPACE by, for instance, the national gay media, such as they are? Relation of this to consumer identities? (I'm thinking of Lauren Berlant and Beth Freeman's "Queer Nationalities" paper, but also of the space-structuring, identity-structuring work done by something like THE ADVOCATE--and how that's changing, as well.)